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High Commissioner -
A Dream Fulfilled*

Abdou Diouf

*Contributions
of Great Stature*

Alain St. Ange

*Seychelles' Master
of Promotion*

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Vallée de Mai

Thirty years on



Since the arrival of the early explorers to the Seychelles, **the Vallée de Mai** has inspired wonder and amazement. Named the **'Garden of Eden'** by General Gordon in 1881, this prehistoric forest has long been a place of discovery and adventure.



▲ Inside the mysterious and towering forest of the Vallée de Mai, Seychelles. Photo: C Mason-Parker

Seychelles' number one visitor attraction, a visit to the Vallée de Mai is like a step back in time, to a world where dinosaurs roamed the earth. Part of a global network of natural and cultural heritage sites under the umbrella of UNESCO (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation) the majestic Vallée de Mai was recognised as an area that needed protection as early as 1966 when it was declared a nature reserve by the Seychelles government. 2013 was a historic year for the Vallée de Mai when it celebrated its 30th anniversary as a UNESCO World Heritage Site on 9th December.

Seychelles Islands Foundation (SIF), a public trust, manages both Seychelles UNESCO World Heritage Sites, the Vallée de Mai and Aldabra Atoll, and the Vallée de Mai has been under the protection of SIF since 1989. Known as the '*Green Heart*' of Praslin Island, the Vallée de Mai has literally stepped out of the shadows in the past thirty years. From its small beginnings with just a few guides and small shelter, the site now has nearly 40 staff and an extensive visitor centre. Although famed for the Coco de Mer and Black Parrot that are found there, this ancient forest's secrets are starting to be unearthed with ongoing research finding many treasures. In 2009 a new species of frog was



◀ One of the world's rarest reptiles, the Giant Bronze Gecko.
Photo: L Chong-Seng

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Poaching of the beautiful and valuable Coco de Mer nuts puts the future regeneration of the forest in peril, and endemic plant species fight for space with virulent invasive plants that threaten the native biodiversity of the site.
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uncovered in the Vallée de Mai which occurs only on the island of Praslin. In the same year a forgotten species of chameleon, that was lost to science for nearly 200 years, was re-discovered in the forest. One of the largest gecko species in the world, the Giant Bronze Gecko, was described just ten years ago and is found only in this palm forest, making it one of the world's rarest reptiles. In addition to this, an array of plants and animals has been studied increasing the knowledge of the many unique species that make up this mysterious palm forest. Working in close collaboration with some of the world's foremost institutions has meant that to date the Vallée de Mai has hosted 10 Master of Science researchers, 2 PhD students, 2 post-doctoral researchers and published 5 scientific papers.

There have been many achievements over the past thirty years but despite this the Vallée de Mai is still in danger. Poaching of the beautiful and valuable Coco de Mer nuts puts the future regeneration of the forest in peril, and endemic plant species fight for space with virulent invasive plants that threaten the native biodiversity of the site. Firm action has been taken against these dangers with an EC funded project tackling the invasive plant



▲ The Seychelles Chameleon, rediscovered after nearly 200 years.
Photo: B Koch



▲ An important source of water for the Praslin community, the Vallée de Mai has a spectacular waterfall.
Photo: Aurelien and Veronique Brusini



▲ The endemic Coco de Mer, symbol of Seychelles.
Photo: Aurelien and Veronique Brusini



▲ The Seychelles Black Parrot. Photo: P Woods



▲ In 2009 the visitor centre was redeveloped, this is how it stands now. Photo: C Mason-Parker

With enhanced visitor services and effective conservation management the Vallée de Mai has become a world class tourist attraction.

species and an expanded environmental education programme skilling the conservationists of the future. With enhanced visitor services and effective conservation management the Vallée de Mai has become a world class tourist attraction. This has brought socio-economic benefits to the tourism industry on Praslin and created many jobs. With over 80,000 visitors a year this forest is now attracting the attention of people far and wide and it should be on the 'to do' list of every visitor to Seychelles.

With thirty successful years under their belt, what next for the Vallée de Mai? SIF Chief Executive Officer, Dr Frauke Fleischer-Dogley, replies *'With such a rich wealth of biodiversity that we are only just beginning to understand, the next thirty years will bring a great deal more research, education and outreach activities to help us to protect and manage the splendour of this forest. Alongside this, collaborative projects with the local community will ensure that there are 'forest custodians' for many years to come.'* 🌿